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Quim Monzó



Quim Monzó

by Manel Ollé (Universitat Pompeu Fabra)

Quim Monzó (Barcelona, 1952) is not just a writer of fiction but also one of the most popular columnists in Catalonia. His journalistic work has been published in various

anthologies. *Vuitanta-sis contes* (Eighty-Six Stories) has been honoured with extensive critical acclaim and prizes and has been translated into Spanish by the prestigious Spanish novelist, Javier Cercas. His work can be read in over fifteen languages.

Quim Monzó was born in Barcelona in 1952. Among other things, he has been a graphic designer, a comic artist, a war correspondent, a songwriter, a scriptwriter for television and radio, a translator (*Jude the Obscure*, by Thomas Hardy, *The Martian Chronicles* by Ray Bradbury, *Nine Stories* by J.D. Salinger...), and, above all, an author. Monzó first appeared on the scene in 1976 when he won the Prudenci Bertrana award with the novel *L'udol del griso al caire de les clavegueres* (The Howl of the Cop on the Edge of the Sewers), which he has never wanted to republish. It was after the publication of his collection of short stories *Uf, va dir ell* (Oof, He Said) that his work began to combine readability with the solvent potency of literature.

Quim Monzó has made his biggest splash in 'minor' genres such as the short story or journalistic literature. And when he has written novels, he has done so using narrative procedures which are alien to 19th century conventions (psychology of the characters, etc.), a fact which has led certain critics to describe these works arbitrarily as being 'long short stories'. Quim Monzó has been little influenced by the Catalan narrative tradition. Only [Pere Calders](#) and Francesc Trabal appear on the list of authors he usually mentions when asked for his literary models. Among the writers who stand out as major influences on his work are Robert Coover, John Barth, Donald Barthelme, Guillermo Cabrera Infante, Julio Cortázar, Adolfo Bioy Cesares, Raymond Queneau... This is quite apart from non-literary influences (video games, the comics of Massimo Mattioli, Tex Avery cartoons).

In various interviews, Monzó has described the process of writing his narrative works as a process of improvisation without a previous plan, which bases its efficiency on the immediate chucking into the wastepaper basket of numerous beginnings and drafts which he has rejected as unworkable and on the methodical and repetitive rewriting from top to bottom of the drafts which work: "I start to write a story without knowing where I'm heading, and let myself go with the flow. That is why fifty per cent of the stories I write go straight into the bin, because they might have brilliant beginnings but they don't work, they don't go anywhere: they're not stories, they are simply narratives. You cannot start a story knowing how it will finish or what will happen, because then you just don't write it." (Eva Piquer: "Quim Monzó the journalist", *Revue...* 1998).

The dynamic behind Quim Monzó's writing lies in a tension between narrative expansion and a formal crystallisation of materials. Everything which at first seems casual, substantive and fluid, suddenly takes on a geometric form. The process of formalisation of the materials is certainly present in the short stories and to a lesser extent in the novels, where the expansive tendency is dominant. Also in the articles, a measured literary formalisation of the materials emerges.

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Monzó's writing traces the paths of the inventions and of the prisons which we ourselves invent for ourselves: the circumvolutions of the circles which entrap us. It doesn't function precisely with biographical data, or generational, sociological, urban or rural data, but rather thanks to the language, the fictions, the illusions and the images shared by the readers. What Quim Monzó writes is not purely fiction, but rather metafiction: fiction about fiction. The mask falls from the face of the prophet, the compulsive liar, the stock hero, the writer and the reader in a demythologising action which is not generated by iconoclastic impulses but in order to strip things bare: to call them by their name. Quim Monzó tells stories and at the same time interrogates them and analyses them. The use of incisive comments in brackets as an ironical mechanism which refracts the voice, and of questions as a mechanism which lays siege to the meaning of events, are a constant factor in the texture of Monzó's prose. Quim Monzó writes metafiction, but not in the culturalist fashion into which those who make abundant use of quotes and rewrites so often fall. As well as interrogating and splitting the voices, he sometimes uses, as raw material for his narratives, previous fictions which are well-known to his readers, in order to invert them, to deform them by perverting their internal logic. The idyllic or at least conventional beginnings, soon turn into personal hells: a visit to the tower of Pisa or a persistent erection cannot avoid the sod's law which rules in the worlds of Monzó. Michèle Gazier has said: "Derrière le pilotage automatiques auquel nous abandonnons nos vies rôdent, selon Monzó, des fantômes, cruels" (*Télérama*, 16-II-1994).

Quim Monzó opts for a genuinely fictional model of literary formalisation, without essayistic contamination, in which everything appears incorporated into literary machines of perpetual motion. They are the forms, the drawings, which trace his fictions, and the sharpened edges of the prose and fiction, and the distances between the voice and the world, and between the fiction and the fiction, which define the co-ordinates of the literary space which is to be crossed. But behind the silky surfaces of fiction which Quim Monzó's prose offers us, there is an implacable analytical capacity: there is pure thought; not a photocopy of worn-out thought, but a brand new perception of the facts, positions of lucidity which dismantle half-truths. With the freshness of a supposed literary ingenuity which is not really there: behind it lies a voracious and conscious reader, very much awake.

The novels Both his first novel, *L'udol del griso al caire de les clavegueres* (1976) and *Self Service* (1977), a collection of stories written in collaboration with Biel Mesquida, are on the margin of Quim Monzó's later work, and hark back to the aesthetic co-ordinates of contemporary works by authors from the so-called "Generation of the 1970s" (Oriol Pi de Cabanyes, Lluís Fernández, Jordi Coca, [Biel Mesquida](#)...) with a notable influence from Julia Kristeva's French magazine *Tel Quel*, marked by a textualism which functioned as one more radical ism in the framework of the extraparliamentary politicisation of the transition period.

After a long stay in New York, Quim Monzó published *Benzina* (Petrol) (1983), a novel about the emptiness and lack of meaning of post-modern art, about an art based on brilliant thoughts based on lies which one ends up believing and have no possible use. 'Benzina' is based on the idea of one character who ends up devouring another. Quim Monzó traces the crossed and symmetrical destinies of two identical painters who don't paint: the circumvolutions around nothingness in a city vaguely based on New York, reduced to its minimum features, around a female gallery owner, around friends and girlfriends and lovers (Helena, Hildegarda, Hug, Hilari, Herundina) and around Hopper's night-time bars and Hockney's swimming-pools. The novel stands out especially due to its capacity for suggesting a new way of looking:

"In *Benzina* I have found some scenes that reminded me of a particular aesthetic cultivated by Germanic writers and film-makers who are fascinated by the American myth. That aesthetic of the

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road-movies, which Wim Wenders captured so well in *Alice in den Städten* (Alice in the Cities), as regards film, or by Peter Handke in *Der Kurze Brief zum langen Abschied* (A Short Letter for a Long Goodbye). In this sense, I would define Monzó's modernity as a new way of looking, a new discursive logic on the banal, but always fascinating, act of looking. And also as a recreation of blank thinking, of the capacity to think without intentions, just pour le plaisir." (Antoni Munné: *El País*, 17-VII -1983).

La magnitud de la tragèdia (The Extent of the Tragedy) (1989), the author's third novel, plays with the cliché of the person whose days are counted. The novel's main character, after a night spent drinking and fornicating, finds to his surprise that he has a permanent erection. This sudden transformation allows him to throw himself into endless sexual activity until, in the eighth chapter, he discovers that there is a tragic dimension to his anatomical change: he has only a few weeks left to live. From this point on the novel drops its initial festive and erotic tone and becomes a dark and anguished thriller. Behind desire, tragedy appears. This bitter aftertaste turns into the other side of the coin of a longing for pleasure and vitalism. Quim Monzó manages to convert the shocking image of the endless erection into something which is much more than an excuse to keep the story moving forward. As he himself says in an interview: "It struck me that this image had something behind it, that it was metaphorical to some extent, an emblem of the human condition, of the thirst for life." (*Diario 16*, 29-IX-1990).

The novel traces the story of two characters in parallel: the bearer of the erect member and his stepdaughter, a teenager who is both libidinous and repressed, with whom he maintains a high tension relationship. The main characters always appear at loggerheads with their immediate future, in a story which traces an implacable satire of sentimentalism and tackiness written from the point of view of a savage joy, from a lucid pessimism which is not at all masochistic.

The short stories From the first collection of short stories *Uf, va dir ell* (1978) through to *Guadalajara* (1996), there is a noticeable evolution toward the maximum elision of superfluous elements, both as regards the fiction as well as the diction and the model of literary language. Monzó opts for a rigorous conception of the short story, in which the formalism that operates by subtraction does not lead to a gratuitous game but to domestic mazes from which there is no way out. As he said in an interview: "I don't know if this sounds a little tacky or clichéd, but the air is full of stories. You walk along the street and they're everywhere. However, to find where the story is, you have to go sculpting it, removing everything that is accessory, reducing the air to the necessary point. My obsession is to go on stripping, hence my fascination for the story as a form." (*El Punt* 17-X-1996).

Among the various collections of short stories, the two latest stand out. *El perquè de tot plegat* (The Why of Everything) (1993) deals with all the combinatory possibilities of desire and of male-female relationships in a way which is almost monographic. The collection is remarkable for the radical nature of its propositions, for the harshness of tone, marked by a pessimistic humour which is not lacking in a certain understanding once the masks have fallen away:

"There is in his cynicism, in his misogynistic irony, a bitter, disenchanting flavour, a lack of faith in human beings which is more resigned than tragic, more philosophical than desperate." (Alicia Giménez Barlett: *El Mundo*, 13-III.1993).

From the threshold of his latest collection, *Guadalajara* (1996), Quim Monzó invites us to enter and remain forever trapped in the little machines for kidnapping anguish and stupefaction which are his stories, not with the sadistic aim of making us suffer, on the contrary: he wishes to allow us to experience the catharsis of living the repetitive refrain of the song of suffering from the reasonable

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distance of the listener who is, at the same time, the reader:

"*Guadalajara* is a series of dead ends. I believe it is more distressing, more to do with a 'struggle against fate', with people who tire of doing what they are always doing...". (El País 17-X-1996).

Added to the pleasure of traversing the precise prose of Monzó's stories, the recognition in the narrative of triangles, chains, forks, crossroads, impossible symmetries, Moebius strings, circles and endless spirals - similar to the visual artefacts of Escher - provokes, in the end, an aesthetic pleasure which is not an end in itself: it is mixed up with the undefinable aftertaste of the sensations and of the mental position which the writing creates. At the end of each story we find ourselves at the exit of a brief maze, similar to those which contemporary man walks through again and again. According to the author:

"The characters in *Guadalajara* live submerged in a profound individual bitterness. Looking at them a posteriori, I see them as individuals caught in a maze, who see no way out, and who really want to throw in the towel." (*Diari de Balears* 17-X-1996).

The articles Quim Monzó's journalistic literature is vital - and not a marginal - part of his work, with a total of six collections of articles published. A read through of these collections provides us with an irreplaceable record of the last two decades: a record which has conveniently been filtered, mediatized, and decanted by writing which is fast and implacable, which reduces all kinds of public discourses to the absurd. Quim Monzó puts penetrating analysis and sheer force of argument at the service of an inexhaustible capacity for reaction: electricity companies, phone companies, traditional Spanish nationalism, Catalan sub-nationalism, more or less familiar fundamentalist attitudes disguised as progressive ones, Olympic humbug, the arrogance of institutions, the pitfalls of bilingualism, institutional and non-institutional advertising, puffed up and misinformed journalism, and, in general, all kinds of disguised discourses, half-truths, and general hoodwinking find an alert, belligerent opponent in his articles. Oriol Malló has spoken of: "Monzó the ombudsman, the scourge of dirty waiters, neofascist taxi drivers, whoring porters, teachers at the Rosa Sensat schools, David Lynch fanatics, Mediterranean designers or lethal scooter riders" (*El Temps*, 14-X-1991).

Fleeing just in time from the solidified image of himself, which was becoming dangerously close to pigeonholing him as a rather modern oracle-like figure, Quim Monzó stopped writing articles for young, informed readers towards the beginning of the 1990s; his journalistic literature - ever more journalistic and less literary inasmuch as he opts for opinion, efficient language and public affairs - is now addressed to that animal which is both abstract and concrete, obvious and non-existent, which is the man in the street. Without having to remind the reader that he is a writer with every line he writes, Quim Monzó writes his columns as a consumer, user, receiver or spectator: in the language of the latter, from a standpoint shared with that of readers who are Catalan - Spanish - citizens at the end of the 20th century. So it is that we can qualify his articles as political. Regarding the evolution and the constant elements in his journalistic output, Quim Monzó defines himself in these terms:

"I am less and less candid, perhaps. At any rate, the core of the articles remains the same: the fight against cliché, against the commonplace, against banality, against all the blablabla. And the idea of the qualities which an article must have, is also the same: a clear exposition, a direct, ironic, comprehensible style; and a carefully thought-out conclusion. Inspiration doesn't exist in any literary genre. Therefore, it doesn't exist in column-writing." (*El Temps*, 23-IV-1990).

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The author

Life

 **WEB: In Wikipedia**

Biography, works and links on the author in the free encyclopaedia.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Quim_Monzó

 **WEB: The author in the Catalan Encyclopaedia**

<http://www.grec.cat/cgi-bin/hecangcl2.pgm?&USUARI=&SESSIO=&NDCHEC=0044177&PGMORI=E>

Works and translations

 **WEB: Quim Monzó's translated works**

In the TRAC database, from Institut Ramon Llull.

https://lletra.uoc.eduhttps://www.llull.cat/english/recursos/trac_traduccions.cfm

 **WEB: Works in the Biblioteca de Catalunya**

http://cataleg.bnc.cat/search*eng/?searchtype=a&searcharg=Monz%C3%B3+Quim&sortdropdown=-&searchscope=13&searchscope2=13&SORT=D

 **WEB: The author in The European Library**

<http://search.theeuropeanlibrary.org/portal/en/search/%28%22creator%22+all+%22monz%C3%B3+quim%22%29.query>

 **WEB: The author in the Congress Library (US)**

https://lletra.uoc.eduhttps://catalog.loc.gov/vwebv/search?searchArg=quim+monz%C3%B3&searchC ode=GKEY^*&searchType=0&recCount=25

 **WEB: The author in the COPAC Catalogue (UK)**

<http://copac.ac.uk/search?&au=Quim+Monz%C3%B3>

 **WEB: Monzó in WorldCat**

Bibliographical information in the union catalog from the Online Computer Library Center (OCLC).

http://www.worldcat.org/search?q=%22quim+monz%C3%B3%22&qt=results_page

A selection of texts

Text

 **WEB: 8 short stories by Quim Monzó**

'Landscape with Strikers', 'My Brother', 'Immolation', 'Mr. Beneset', 'Honesty', 'Thirty Lines', 'The Fork' and 'I Have Nothing to Wear'. In *Words without Borders*.

<http://www.wordswithoutborders.org/contributor/quim-monzo>

 **WEB: One night**

A short story from *A Thousand Morons* (2007).

<https://lletra.uoc.eduhttps://www.guernicamag.com/fiction/one-night/>

 **WEB: A cut**

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A short story from *A Thousand Morons* (2007).

<http://numerocinqmagazine.com/2012/12/11/a-cut-fiction-quim-monzo/>

 **WEB: Outside the Gates of Troy**

A short story from the book *Guadalajara* (1997).

https://lletra.uoc.eduhttps://www.guernicamag.com/fiction/monzo_6_15_11/

 **WEB: Gregor**

A short story from the book *Guadalajara* (1997).

<http://numerocinqmagazine.com/2011/03/05/gregor-a-short-story-by-quim-monzo/>

 **PDF: Books**

A short story from the book *Guadalajara* (1996).

http://www.rochester.edu/College/translation/threepersent/index.php?s=file_download&id=92

 **PDF: I'm going to tell you a story**

Opening speech at the 2007 Frankfurt Book Fair. In German, English, Catalan and Spanish.

<http://www.vilaweb.cat/media/attach/vwedts/docs/discursinaugural.pdf#page=15>

 **WEB: Monzó in Google Books**

<https://lletra.uoc.eduhttps://www.google.com/search?tbm=bks&q=inauthor%3AQuim+monz%C3%B3>

Reviews and interviews

Reviews

 **WEB: Website devoted to the author**

In Catalan, Spanish and English. With biographical note, published books and critical texts on his work.

<http://www.monzo.info/>

 **WEB: Monzó, translated**

Informations about the translations of Monzó's works. In the Visat (PEN Català) website.

<http://www.visat.cat/traduacions-literatura-catalana/eng/autor/14/quim-monzo.html>

 **WEB: Quim Monzó in AELC (Association of Catalan Language Writers)**

Includes biography, works, prizes, interviews and fragments of some of his works.

http://www.escriptors.cat/autors/monzoq/pagina.php?id_sec=3910

 **WEB: I mille (personaggi) cretini di Quim Monzó**

A review of *Mille cretini* by Francesco Feola (26/10/2017).

<https://lletra.uoc.eduhttps://francescofeola.wordpress.com/2017/10/26/i-mille-personaggi-cretini-di-quim-monzo/>

 **PDF: From utopia to shock and amazement**

Julià Guillamon about the career of Quim Monzó. In *Catalan Writing. Who's who*, 1 (Winter 2007).

http://www.traces.uab.es/tracesbd/catalanwriting/2007/catalanwriting_a2007thivernn1p1swhoswho.pdf

 **PDF: Books reviewed**

In *Catalan Writing. Who's who*, 1 (Winter 2007).

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http://www.traces.uab.es/tracesbd/catalanwriting/2007/catalanwriting_a2007thivernn1p2swhoswho.pdf

 **WEB: A taste of the Catalan cream**

Michael Euade recommends *The Enormity of the Tragedy*, in *The Independent* (21/09/2007).
<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/the-enormity-of-the-tragedy-by-quim-monzo-243-trans-peter-bushbrunder-the-dust-by-jordi-coca-trans-richard-thomson-464509.html>

 **WEB: Ship of Fools**

A Review of Quim Monzo's *A Thousand Morons*, by Richard Farrell. In *Numero Cinq Magazine*, 12 (December 2012).

<http://numerocinqmagazine.com/2012/12/10/ship-of-fools-a-review-of-quim-monzos-a-thousand-morons-richard-farrell/>

 **WEB: At Le Matricule des Anges**

Reviews of different works by Quim Monzó in French.
http://www.lmda.net/din/aut_lmda.php?Id=2175

Interviews

 **WEB: The Catalan Paradox: Writers, Editors, and Translators on the Literature of a Stateless Language**

Azareen Van der Vliet Oloomi interviews Quim Monzó, in *Los Angeles Review of Books* (01/03/2019).
<https://lletra.uoc.eduhttps://lareviewofbooks.org/article/catalan-paradox-writers-editors-translators-literature-stateless-language/#!>

 **PDF: 'Is there that much difference between Starbucks and the Guggenheim?'**

An interview with Quim Monzó by Manel Ollé in *Transfer*, iss. 3 (2008).
http://www.llull.cat/rec_transfer/webt3/transfer03_dia02.pdf

 **WEB: An interview**

An interview with the author in *The Barcelona Review* (May 1997).
<http://www.barcelonareview.com/arc/inter/monint.htm>

The author 2.0

In the social network

 **WEB: Monzó in Twitter**

[Tweets by @QuimMonzo](#)

<https://lletra.uoc.eduhttps://twitter.com/QuimMonzo>